

## Wyatt's Law Committee Hearing Statement – Erica Hammel

The #1 misconception about child abuse is the thought "It will never happen to my child." I certainly thought this. I mean I was raised in a great home with 2 loving parents. I thought I was the luckiest girl in the world to have found love young and be getting married at 22. And then my life got even more wonderful when I found out I was pregnant with my son Wyatt.

The day Wyatt was born was the best day of my life. I was living the life I had always imagined for myself. A wonderful husband, a healthy son, and I couldn't wait for the many years of happiness to come. Never in a million years would I have thought that when my baby boy was only 4 months old, my husband would leave us and have an affair with another woman. But it happened.

My husband was having an affair with a woman named Rachel Edwards. I only had met her once, but call it a mother's intuition; something didn't feel right about her. That feeling weighed heavy on me. I told my attorney this and he asked if I had any "proof" to back up my feeling so we could use that in the custody hearing of my divorce. I googled "Rachel Edwards", searched her name on OTIS (offender tracking information system), and even searched her name on the sex offender registry. I found nothing. So when my ex and I had our custody hearing, my attorney asked the referee to not grant my ex overnights because of my concerns of Rachel. With no proof, the referee granted my ex overnight visits. There was nothing I could do at this point. All I could do was hope and pray that Wyatt would be safe.

On November 1, 2013 at 6:51am in the morning I received a phone call from my ex saying that Wyatt was being rushed to Children's Hospital of Michigan because he was "breathing funny". That's all the info he gave me and told me he'd meet me at the hospital as he was at work. My mind instantly went to "Who was Wyatt left alone with?" My ex had told me when he had to work that his mother was watching Wyatt. When I ran frantically into the ER of Children's I was stopped by a member of the neurosurgery team. She told me that Wyatt had suffered a major brain bleed and fractured skull that were due to non-accidental injuries. I immediately dropped to the ground and frantically asked if my baby was going to be okay. All I was told was that "he was in the best place possible and that they were going to do all they could." I was literally living my worst nightmare. It was officially ruled, by a doctor expert on child abuse, that Wyatt had been injured by shaken baby syndrome. Wyatt's total lists of injuries were a massive right brain bleed, fractured skull, bilateral retinal hemorrhages, and broken ribs. Wyatt spent 6 days on life support in the PICU. He then spent an additional 6 weeks on the Children's hospital rehab unit. Everything he learned in his first year of life had been erased. To date Wyatt has endured 6 surgeries. 4 brain and 2 eye surgeries. Not to mention the countless MRI's, CT scans,

x-rays, EEG's, and other testing he's gone through. Wyatt has permanent brain damage. He is blind in the left eye from his shaking. He is cognitively impaired and developmentally delayed. He has weakness on his left side and has severe sensory issues. He can't handle loud noises or crowded places. Since getting out of the hospital almost 3 years ago, he has had ongoing outpatient physical, occupational, and speech therapy. And according to his doctor, he will never be able to live life on his own.

Now back to the person who was convicted of abusing my son, Rachel Edwards. After Wyatt was shaken, the police revealed to me that Rachel Edwards had a criminal history of child abuse. She was convicted in 2011 of 3<sup>rd</sup> degree child abuse and in 2013 just a couple weeks before she almost killed Wyatt she was convicted of 4<sup>th</sup> degree child abuse. She never got any prison time and was only given probation and fines. I was so enraged. My instincts were right and had there been a searchable registry for convicted child abusers, I know this all would have never happened to Wyatt.

Rachel Edwards took a plea deal and was sentenced 33 months-10 years behind bars. She is up for parole this upcoming March. I had to relive everything when I addressed the parole board back in August. Rachel Edwards had her turn in front of the parole board this past Monday. I will find out within 30 days if she is granted parole or not. 33 months is not enough time behind bars for leaving my baby with permanent brain damage. Heck, 10 years isn't enough time. But these light sentences and "slaps on the wrist" are happening with child abuse cases all over the state and all over the country. If we cannot keep or put these people who are CONVICTED of hurting our most innocent and vulnerable members of society, our children, behind bars, then we as parents and guardians have a right to know who they are so we can keep our children away from them.

Nationally, prior CPS history has been found to be the single best predictor of repeat abuse in children. Yes, CPS has a central registry that is NOT available to the public. Not everyone on the central registry has been criminally charged or convicted of child abuse. Wyatt's Law is NOT something CPS throws you on. You would have to be criminally charged and then convicted of child abuse in a court of law to be on Wyatt's Law.

With divorce rates as high as they are, and more people having children unwed. Our children today can be exposed to a lot of different people coming into their lives. Wouldn't you want to know if an adult who was around your child had a criminal history of child abuse? Statistics show that abusers are more likely to abuse again than not.

The governor of Indiana signed a bill called "Kirk's Law" which would be a child abuser registry into law this past March. Indiana is as you know, is a republican state. The bill passed unanimously across the board and now their registry goes into effect in July of 2017. The state

of Utah is about to introduce a bill for a child abuser registry called "Miley's bill". And the state of Kentucky has a bill in their legislature for a child abuser registry called "Sophie's Law". Sophie's mom reached out to me after our bills were introduced on how she could get this going in her state. I truly believe this is going to be ripple effect across each state.

70% of the children who die from child abuse or neglect were under the age of 2. Wyatt was the age of 1 when he was shaken. He couldn't fight back and didn't have a voice just like many children who are abused. It seems like we are so worried as a society of the rights of those who hurt children, but where were my son's rights? Where are his rights now? According to a recent report released by the Michigan League of Human Services, child abuse is at a 25 year high here in the state of Michigan. What we currently have in place to protect our children is not good enough.

That is why I am here today. Not just because of what happened to my son Wyatt, but to also prevent another child and parent from going through what Wyatt and I have gone through. Even if this legislation saved one child's life it would be worth it. I truly believe it's going to save many children's lives. I was always taught that if you wanted to make a change that you had to become that change you wanted to see. That's exactly why I started a petition on change.org that currently has over 23,000 signatures, and then wrote to my local state representative Rep. Sarah Roberts. I'm so thankful that she listened to me and believed in this too. Then having former Rep. Derek Miller join on and finding out that he had prosecuted Rachel Edwards on one of her previous convictions. And then of course having Rep. Vanessa Guerra who had no ties to me, sponsor one of the bills as well. I'm so proud of this legislation the 4 of us created. I'm so proud Wyatt's story has been spread across local and national news stations. I'm blown away by the thousands of people who follow the Facebook page I keep on Wyatt called Wyatt the Warrior. I'm humbled by the fact that I get daily messages from mothers and grandparents all over the world thanking me for bringing this issue to light. And I'm honored when they ask me how to get this type of legislation started where they live. The saying goes "it takes a village to raise a child" and that's exactly what Wyatt's Law helps do. With all due respect we need to man and woman up as state and face the reality of the epidemic of child abuse. Because that's exactly what it is: an epidemic. Children who are abused are 9x's more likely to commit a crime in their adult life. Children are our future. If we don't break this cycle, the cycle is going to continue to break our state. Take the politics out of these bills, please. We need to stop brushing it under the rug; stop pretending like the issue is being handled, and doing EVERYTHING in our power to protect those who can't protect themselves. So I am asking for your support in these bills and I am asking for you to please give these bills a vote. Think about your children, your grandchildren, your nieces and/or nephews. Wyatt's Law will help ensure a safer world for them.

